

Bible - Interpretation

What Happens When Churches Employ the 'Hermeneutic of Trust'?

By Dr. Paul M. Elliott

Part three of a series. Read [part two](#).

Knox Theological Seminary, citing the Presbyterian Church in America's employment of this hermeneutic, decided it could have an admitted theistic evolutionist on its faculty.

In our last article in this series, we demonstrated that reputedly conservative churches and educational institutions are embracing a counterfeit method of Biblical interpretation – the so-called "hermeneutic of trust" – that is a prescription for doctrinal anarchy. We cited, as an example, the use of this "anything goes" approach to Biblical interpretation by the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia.

Another example of the danger of this hermeneutic comes from Knox Theological Seminary and the denomination with which it is affiliated, the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA). Knox hired admitted theistic evolutionist Dr. Bruce Waltke as a member of its faculty, and cited the PCA's use of this flawed hermeneutic as justification.

In an [article](#) some time ago, we reported that Dr. Waltke, then a professor of Old Testament at Reformed Theological Seminary in Orlando, Florida, had come out of the closet as a theistic evolutionist.

In the resulting furor, Waltke resigned his faculty post at RTS. But within a short time Waltke was hired by Knox Theological Seminary, an educational arm of Coral Ridge

Presbyterian Church (PCA) in Florida, to teach Old Testament subjects as a member of its resident faculty. In a joint statement by its board chairman, president, and dean of faculty, Knox Seminary defended hiring Waltke by saying that "when he is allowed to speak for himself, Dr. Waltke clearly demonstrates that his personal views are consistent with confessional orthodoxy."

Nothing could be farther from the truth. In a video published on the website of the BioLogos Foundation, a theistic evolutionist think-tank, Waltke said that "the data is overwhelmingly in favor of evolution" and that "to deny that reality" makes Bible-believing Christians "a cult, some odd group that is not really interacting with the world." He went on to say that denial of evolution is "spiritual death" for the church - a "witness to the world that we are not credible, that we are bigoted, we have a blind faith, and this is what we are accused of."¹

If that is orthodoxy, then Charles Darwin must have been a fundamentalist.

Waltke's "Clarifying Statement"

What happens when, as the Knox Seminary leadership puts it, Waltke "is allowed to speak for himself" - as though he did not on the video? Does he contradict his pro-evolution statements in the BioLogos video? No, he defends and expands them. In a followup article posted on the BioLogos website, Waltke issues this "clarifying statement" that is supposed to assure Christians that he is theologically sound, but does nothing of the sort:

Adam and Eve are historical figures from whom all humans are descended; they are uniquely created in the image of God and as such are not in continuum with animals.

Adam is the federal and historical head of the fallen human race just as Jesus Christ is the federal and historical head of the Church.

I am not a scientist, but I have familiarized myself with attempts to harmonize Genesis 1-3 with science, and I believe that creation by the process of evolution is a tenable Biblical position, and, as represented by BioLogos, the best Christian apologetic to defend Genesis 1-3 against its critics.

I apologize for giving the impression that others who seek to harmonize the two differently are not credible. I honor all who contend for the Christian faith.

Evolution as a process must be clearly distinguished from evolutionism as a philosophy. The latter is incompatible with orthodox Christian theology.

Science is fallible and subject to revision. As a human and social enterprise, science will always be in flux. My first commitment is to the infallibility (as to its authority) and inerrancy (as to its Source) of Scripture.

God could have created the Garden of Eden with apparent age or miraculously, even as Christ instantly turned water into wine, but the statement that God "caused the trees to grow" argues against these notions.

I believe that the Triune God is Maker and Sustainer of heaven and earth and that biblical Adam is the historical head of the human race.

Theological comments made here are mostly a digest of my chapters on Genesis 1-3 in *An Old Testament Theology* (Zondervan, 2007).²

"Authority" That Isn't Authority, "Inerrancy" That Isn't Inerrancy

Several gross inconsistencies in Dr. Waltke's statement reveal his true position:

- He asserts that "creation by the process of evolution is a tenable Biblical position." Old Testament scholar Waltke simply ignores the fact that the Hebrew words of Genesis chapter one clearly declare that God created the heavens and the earth out of nothing by His spoken word alone, in the space

of six literal days.³ That is, as he notes above, the position he takes in his 2007 commentary on Genesis.

- Waltke asserts that a distinction can be drawn between "evolution as a process" and "evolutionism as a philosophy." What he really posits is a non-existent gray area between Biblical light and naturalistic darkness. His intellectual and theological surrender to the notion of "evolution as a process" is in fact rooted in a surrender to those who embrace "evolutionism as a philosophy."
- The reason for Waltke's surrender becomes clear in the next sentences of his statement. He says he is committed to the infallibility of Scripture "as to its authority" and to the inerrancy of Scripture "as to its Source." What is left unsaid, but is clearly demonstrated by the position he has taken, is that Bruce Waltke is *not* committed to Scripture as the *sole* authority, nor is he committed to Scripture's inerrancy as to its *content*. A commitment to Biblical inerrancy *only* "as to its Source" is no commitment to inerrancy at all. It is postmodernist linguistic gymnastics. Furthermore, without a commitment to the inerrancy of the Bible's content, there can be no commitment to the *sole* authority of Scripture.
- Waltke's position tells us what authority he really puts in first place. He has made a conscious decision to place the speculative word of evolutionists (it matters not whether they style themselves "theistic" or "atheistic") in authority over the clear statements of the Word of God. He sees this capitulation as the "best Christian apologetic to defend Genesis 1-3 against its critics"! Yet Waltke admits that the word of man that he has placed in authority over the Word of God "is fallible and subject to revision" and "will always be in flux." Thus Bruce Waltke has made himself Exhibit A of the

postmodern confusion that is rampant among reputedly conservative theologians in our time.

- Waltke's lack of genuine commitment to Biblical authority and inerrancy is further underscored by his statement that God "could have" created the Garden of Eden miraculously. God's own eye-witness account says that He did, but Waltke says it is an open question. He says he believes "that the Triune God is Maker and Sustainer of heaven and earth" but he disagrees with God's own account of how He made them.

Knox Seminary's Shameful Statement

The leadership of Knox Theological Seminary had no problem with all of this, and hired Bruce Waltke to teach Old Testament subjects beginning in the spring of 2011. A joint statement by Dr. Luder Whitlock, Chairman of the Board, Dr. Ron Kovack, President of the Seminary, and Dr. Warren A. Gage, Interim Dean of Faculty says that "in our opinion, Dr. Waltke's views are wholly compatible with our confessional standards, and incompatible with naturalistic and materialist theories of evolution."⁴

One may ask, "How can the leadership of a purportedly conservative seminary make such a preposterous statement?" The answer from the Knox leadership is, "It's easy. We have our denomination's authority to do it!"

Variance regarding the authority of the Bible is unacceptable. On the other hand, there are occasional differences regarding what the Bible says. Differences have repeatedly occurred regarding the interpretation of the creation account in Genesis 1. Recent controversy reminds us that wide differences of interpretive models are permitted in our own denomination [the Presbyterian Church in America], as can be observed from the *PCA Study Report on Creation*. Several views have been represented on our faculty, from the view

that the Hebrew word day (*yom*) is to be understood as a twenty-four hour literal day to the understanding that the same narrative may be providing a "framework" for a period of time longer than a literal day.⁵

The Hermeneutic That Opened the Door

The *Report* to which the Knox leadership refers was issued by a PCA General Assembly study committee in 2000. The committee included advocates of interpretations of Genesis that range all the way from *ex nihilo* creation in six literal days, to billions of years of death and struggle.

The *Report* stated that widely divergent teachings on the nature and length of the days of creation in Genesis chapter one all fall into the category of "literal" and "historical" interpretations. It said that a "literal" and "historical" day can be virtually anything one wishes it to be - an ordinary day, an ambiguous literary figure, or a day-age comprising billions of years.

While this result was not surprising, it is deeply disturbing. The committee not only abandoned sound principles for the interpretation of Scripture, but embraced a radically revisionist, postmodernist hermeneutic instead – the same "hermeneutic of trust" that the Orthodox Presbyterian Church would employ in its own compromise creation report in 2004.

Like the OPC, the PCA endorsed the position that men of the church can all be said to embrace the same "doctrine," even if they differ radically on the meaning of its words, even if they differ radically on the principles and methods of interpretation used to arrive at the meaning of those words, and even if they arrive at conclusions that are mutually exclusive. Furthermore, no one has the right to say that the position he holds is the truth, to the exclusion of all others. Men holding widely varying views about the meaning of the words of Scripture - even diametrically opposing views - can

all fit under the same "big tent" as long as they can all disingenuously recite the words of a man-made confessional statement together. This is the postmodern definition of "confessional orthodoxy."

The PCA (and the Orthodox Presbyterian Church in its similar 2004 creation report) has judged that stretching the tent to cover every position short of atheistic evolution, in order to keep peace and avoid secular ridicule, is more important than faithful, accurate interpretation of Scripture. Obviously the leadership of Knox Seminary feels the same way. Thus they have deliberately failed in their duty to act as watchmen on the walls to protect the institution and its students from false teaching.

Under This Hermeneutic, No Doctrine Is Safe

Once this snowball of theological compromise begins to roll, it grows into an avalanche far faster than most people would imagine. If Christians apply the same no-rules method of interpretation to the Bible as a whole - and why shouldn't they when reputedly conservative seminary professors and ministers lead the way? - then no doctrine is safe from radical revision. The entire system of Christian doctrine can - and does - come under attack.

We see this in case after case in the PCA today. The PCA's downward slide is accelerating at breathtaking speed. The PCA General Assembly has officially repudiated the requirement for strict subscription to doctrinal standards. One of the PCA's most popular preachers, Timothy Keller, is a theistic evolutionist. The Federal Vision heresy of justification by faith plus works is openly taught and tolerated, and efforts to stem the tide (much less reverse it) are failing. Anything goes in worship, from Romish formalism to MTV-style entertainment. Women are being given positions of authority and ministry in the PCA that the Scriptures clearly reserve for men, including serving as deacons and vocational preaching. A PCA presbytery recently ordained a minister who sometimes dresses up as "Jesus" to preach.

In the 20th century other denominations, such as the Presbyterian Church in the USA (PCUSA) and the Christian Reformed Church (CRC), went down the same path, and denial of the Genesis creation account was a common starting point. Along the way, both introduced all of the compromises that the PCA has now also embraced. Today, both denominations tolerate and even defend homosexuality, and the PCUSA permits the worship of pagan deities in its churches. Without the solid anchor of uncompromising belief in the inerrancy of the Bible, any abomination is possible, given enough time - and often in a very short time.

The End Result: Delight in Doctrinal Deviancy

The Knox Seminary statement on Bruce Waltke ended with this:

To that end it is a delight for us to report that the Knox Board, on Friday, April 30, 2010, voted unanimously to appoint Dr. Bruce Waltke to our faculty as Distinguished Professor of Old Testament. We rejoice that Dr. Bruce Waltke, honored scholar, teacher, and servant of Christ will join the faculty of Knox as resident faculty each spring, commencing with 2011.

The Knox Board may be delighted, but the God of Creation is grieved.

Next: What is the "Animus Imponentis" and Why Is It a Dangerous Principle of Interpretation?

References:

1. Waltke has since asked BioLogos to remove the incriminating video from its site, but a transcript of Waltke's statement (as viewed on 4/10/2010) appears at *The Design Spectrum* website, <http://thedesignspectrum.wordpress.com/2010/04/10/full-transcript-of-bruce-waltke-video-clip>
2. "Why Must the Church Come to Accept Evolution?: An Update" as viewed on 4/17/2010 at <http://biologos.org/blog/why-must-the-church-come-to-accept-evolution-an-update>.

3. For a discussion of the Hebrew words translated "created" and "made" in Genesis chapter one, and theistic evolutionists' abuse of them, see Dr. Terry Mortenson, "Did God Create (Bara) or Make (Asah) in Genesis One?" at

<http://www.answersingenesis.org/articles/aid/v2/n1/did-god-create-or-make>.

4. The *Knox Statement* (as viewed on 5/13/2010) appears at

<http://www.knoxseminary.edu/Forms/Dr.%20Bruce%20Waltke.pdf>.

5. The *Knox Statement*.

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